

Education, Inclusion, Reconciliation

I am honored to be part of this Initiatives in Refugee and Migrant Education convocation **here in Rome**, and thank you for making JRS an important part of your time together.

As Cardinal Czerny mentioned, it is a happy coincidence that yesterday was the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees. As always, Pope Francis' words are inspiring and challenging to all of us. This year's focus of "building the future with migrants and refugees" provides a reflection point for our work together with and for the millions of forcibly displaced people around the world whom we engage in our work as educators. In his message, he is quick to point out how much each of those on the margins, in particular, refugees and migrants, can contribute to the process of construction, of building this future.

But I have to tell you that there is one part of the message that has stayed with me, these stirring words:

No one must be excluded. God's plan is essentially inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries.

God's plan is essentially inclusive. How do we understand that?

I think we begin with the obvious reality: while God's plan is inclusive, that is not always, or perhaps not even often, true for us as world, as society, as Church.

To look at this, I invite us to reflect a bit on one of the most inclusive events of recent memory: the response to Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainians have been given legal status in many parts of Europe and have been welcomed in many other parts of the world in a way very different than most refugees are received. Professor Matthew Gibney of the Refugee Study Center

at Oxford University recently reflected on this extraordinary response.

Gibney proposes four reasons why societies should respond positively to forcibly displaced people.

1. The humanitarian rescue principle, our moral duty to rescue those in dire need.
2. The reparative or restorative principle: we caused the problem, so we have a duty to assist.
3. The shared identity principle: they are like us, so we will help.
4. The system legitimacy principle: if we do not offer protection, we lack moral authority.

We can see each of these operative in this generous response.

- Humanitarian: People are in need
- Restorative: Our dependence on Russian energy helped cause this issue, so we need to respond.
- Legitimacy: If we do not help, we are no better than the Russians

But Gibney suggests that it is shared identity which make a difference with Ukraine. Europeans and other developed world communities saw Ukrainians as "like us," and that's why the doors have been opened. To varying degrees, forcibly displaced people crossing barriers like the Mediterranean, the Darien Peninsula in Panama, the mountains between Myanmar and India, are not seen as "like us," and frankly, at this moment in our history, the moral weight of humanitarianism, restorative justice, and legitimate authority seems to be scraping along the bottom.

Pope Francis has been an indefatigable advocate of the reality of shared identity: from the first visit of his pontificate to Lampedusa, to the latest work of art in St. Peter's Square, to last year's Message on World Migrant & Refugee Day, which invited us to build "an ever wider we."

But his understanding of our shared identity/humanity and that of most of the world are not on the same wavelength, and unless we are careful, we will find ourselves doing the same

cherry-picking of shared identity: some forcibly displaced people are more worthy; refugees in tertiary education or working for a bachelor's degree are a better investment; I will work with groups who don't argue with the program I want to present, etc.

No one must be excluded. How can we understand and act that in our broken and fragmented world? Let me turn to a different part of Pope Francis' ministry.

I followed Francis' recent visit to Canada to engage with native peoples on the Church's role in Indigenous Residential Schools with a mixture of trepidation and amazement. While no papal visit is perfect, and plenty have parsed its imperfections, Francis' ability to enter into the reality of the harm done to native peoples there in the name of the Church was striking.

While there, Francis proposed a distinctive understanding of working together to rebuild trust-- to make sure no one is excluded-- an understanding

which I think is also relevant to our work as refugee educators. It is the lens of reconciliation.

In his meeting with indigenous peoples and members of the parish community at Sacred Heart church in Edmonton, Alberta, Francis acknowledged the role that Catholics had in "policies of assimilation and enfranchisement that inculcated a sense of inferiority, robbing communities and individuals of their cultural and spiritual identity." He goes on to say that "this was also done in the name of an educational system that was supposedly Christian."

He then adds: "thanks be to God, for in parishes like this, day by day, through encounter, foundations are being laid for healing and reconciliation." He goes on to build the reality of reconciliation in the image of the cross, the tree of life, on which Jesus accomplished God's plan to reconcile all things. The church is now, we are now, a living body of reconciliation, and Francis draws on the linguistic relationship between the words reconcile and council, and calling us to see the

church as "the house where we 'conciliate' anew, where we meet to start over and grow together."

Fr. Raymond De Souza, in a contribution to the National Catholic Register, puts this in ecclesial and human terms: "reconciliation thus is not something accomplished by two communities in growing concord, but rather by members of the same community who participate in an authentic communion."

Isn't what we do as refugee educators fundamentally about this? Don't we want to tear down the walls that divide us and get to the deeper experience of human solidarity, conciliating anew our broken world so that indeed, no one is excluded? This deep, Christocentric, ecclesial understanding of shared identity is prophetic: it is not only Ukrainians who are like us, but also Rohingya, trafficked people, LGBTQ refugees, and anyone else who knows what it is like to be on the outside looking in.

Reconciliation, of course, takes many forms. Our reconciliation work in JRS focuses on principles

that allow disparate groups - tribes or national groups within a refugee camp, host communities interacting with refugee communities - to find common ground and to build a common life together. Sometimes the work has an explicit faith-based dimension, and other times the interactions are more practical: how do we build a new school together? In any case, a reweven social fabric where exclusion is not the norm is both the context and the goal.

As refugee educators, how do we incorporate the grace of reconciliation into the work that we do? Let me return to Pope Francis' presentation at Sacred Heart Church. He contrasts the educational system that was "supposedly Christian" with his definition of the process: *...(E)ducation is an adventure, in which we explore and discover together the mystery of life.*

For refugee education in the context of communal reconciliation, let me propose three aspects: what our forcibly displaced sisters and brothers

contribute, what we, as educators contribute, and what we build together.

The refugee contribution:

If we are indeed part of a single community, it is incumbent on us to recognize what our sisters and brothers bring to the education process, and therefore, when we do not (necessarily) have to contribute. Foremost and foundational among what forcibly displaced people bring is hope. Now we all might define hope differently. I would say it not the same as optimism - things will not be better tomorrow. Hope is the foundation and horizon in which we operate, the belief that we are being called to fulfillment, and of the Holy One, however we name it, is drawing us there.

I say you and I do not have to provide that hope because our refugee brothers and sisters would not be here if they did not have it. To risk all one has by leaving home is ultimately a trust in the future, a felt sense of hope.

We are sometimes overwhelmed by the numbers of refugees, the overwhelming needs and the seemingly intractable problems. Those we accompany, however, cannot imagine even being alive without hope. Hope begins with individual lives and stories.

In essence, hope is a particular gift that by animating individuals, animates an entire community. The following story has become my favorite proof of such a reality. Early on in the Covid crisis, after Sunday mass in Kakuma camp, a Congolese refugee named Charité came up to Fr Lasantha D'Abrew SJ and shared his perspective on the pandemic:

- Father, there is no need to be anxious. You fear because of uncertainties. We as refugees experienced these uncertainties from the moment we started running away from our countries. When we took the first step from our lands, we did not know the future. Those were dark uncertain moments. We lost everything, but God saved us, so still we are living. We do not know the future but we know that God will care for us. Even when

we die; we die with God who loves and cares for us."

We do not need to bring hope, but cherish it and kindle it.

Our contribution

As our forcibly displaced partners bring hope, what do we bring? I want to suggest that the most important contribution is deeper than the studies and skills we have developed, deeper than the educational structures and systems we bring in service. Underneath it all is something like "#Refugee Lives Matter."

I presume you are all aware of the Black Lives Matter campaign in the United States, a loose coalition that highlights the racism, discrimination, and inequality experienced by black people. While one may critique some of the aspirations of some of the coalition's members, Black Lives Matter (BLM) puts the reality of exclusion on the table.

Some, including some church people, have responded by saying BLM is off the tracks; it should be that "All Lives Matter." While that statement is logically true, it misses the point. Documentable evidence shows that black lives matter less, and to some, not at all. Society does not see black people as part of our community; they are other, and therefore, not part of the communal calculus. If black lives are not considered equally among all lives, that inclusion needs to be done first: *All lives matter* omits them.

So it is with forcibly displaced people. Ukrainians excepted, forcibly displaced people do not count. If they did, it would be a scandal that so many drown in the Mediterranean each year, that children are separated from their parents at the southern USA border, and that Giorgia Meloni is likely the next Prime Minister of Italy.

#Refugee Lives Matter. What we do as educators affirm that these children, women, and men are part

of our human/Church community. When we develop programs to keep girls in school, develop technologies for blended and online learning, develop learning programs so that children with disabilities or with educational gaps are not forever left behind - these are all concrete ways of expressing the hashtag. We may not want to think of ourselves as political actors. But the art of politics is getting others to see things as we see them, and isn't that acknowledgment of our forcibly displaced sisters and brothers foundational to what we do? By what we do in the way we do it, we are advocates for *refugee lives matter*.

What do we do together?

For this, I return to Pope Francis' message for yesterday's commemoration: Building the Future with Migrants and Refugees. Each of us here knows that education plays an essential component in building a future. As we look at how we develop educational programs in dialogue with our beneficiaries, I think

it is important to bring our expertise in dialogue with those we serve so that the education we build together meets their needs and aspirations.

Those needs have changed considerably over the past decades of the refugee reality for two significant reasons:

1. Displacement lasts a long time; if you spend 5 years in a camp, you are likely to spend 20+ years there.
2. Excepting Ukrainians and for a moment Afghans, resettlement is not a realistic possibility for the vast majority of forcibly displaced people in the world.

Our educational efforts need to lead to viable and dignified outcomes where people are, not where they were or we might like them to arrive. This building of the kingdom here and now requires a dialogue among educators and beneficiaries. If my future is in Addis Ababa or Delhi, what I learn needs to give me dignity here. And if I am educating a young woman in Dzaleka camp or Bangkok, I need to give her the

tools that fit her life, not what I am most comfortable with or what we have always done.

This dialogue has been very much part of JRS over the past years. In our recent "mini-revision" of our Strategic Framework, we joined education and livelihoods as a single program priority. Now I know education and livelihoods are in different humanitarian buckets. But by listening to the stories of those we accompany, we have become clear that the education and training we offer has to make a difference as they build their lives here, not there. I am particularly proud of one of our efforts in Kenya to improve tertiary education outcomes among refugee and local students. The most important proof that our job development was working is that a majority of our students are eating better than they had before starting the program.

And I share that story with you knowing we have failed. Years ago, we ran a livelihoods program to train displaced Iraqi men to be barbers. We did such a good job that we torpedoed the market with an

oversupply of hair cutters. When I asked one of our staff people about this problem, the response was "well, at least they had a good experience in class!" Not acceptable.

This story highlights two realities.

- Accountability to those we educate is paramount; they deserve the best we can offer.
- At times we need to ask for forgiveness as well.

The need for reconciliation is a reality in our world and in our work. We as educators with forcibly displaced people have a particular contribution to the fulfillment of God's harmonious plan that Francis describes in yesterday's message.

As I close, let me read in full what Francis had to say about education in Edmonton. In the context of the Indigenous Schools and the damage they did in their "supposedly Christian" manner, Francis has this to say about our mission:

Education must always start from respect and the promotion of talents already present in individuals. It is not, nor can it ever be, something prepackaged and imposed. For education is an adventure, in which we explore and discover together the mystery of life.

We are graced to be called to reconcile, to conciliate anew our human family. Thank you for this opportunity to be with you today.